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Warrior's Knowledge

by Jane M. Lindskold

"Write about what you know" is one of those standard bits of wisdom handed out in fiction writing workshops that troubles anyone who writes science fiction or fantasy. A writer of police procedurals or mysteries can visit the local police station. A romance writer can draw upon personal experience or the experiences of friends. However, an SF writer can't just trot over to the local starport and sign up for piloting lessons. A Fantasy writer can't join the local Wizards Guild and study a few spells.

This isn't meant to be an excuse for lazy writing. More bad SF and Fantasy has been written by writers who don't bother to learn how the "real" elements of their setting works. Thus, in SF we have stories laden with improbable planetary ecologies, aliens that are just humans in furred or scaled suits, and other such abuses. In Fantasy we have horses that are treated more like hairy automobiles, and sword fights that make real fencers sigh in despair and wish they

could challenge the author to a few rounds.

No one was ever likely to challenge Roger Zelazny to one of those duels. He may have had his share of human-like aliens and gonzo spells, but when it came to fight scenes, his details satisfied all but the pickiest that he knew what he was talking about. As a student of both armed and unarmed combat, Roger brought his knowledge to his writing.

Roger's formal study of martial arts began with fencing and judo when he was an undergraduate. A slim, very shy young man who wanted to be a poet, he did not seem like the type to be drawn to fighting arts of any sort.

However, Western Reserve (now Case Western Reserve) required four semesters of physical education. Roger "couldn't stand" team sports, so he tried fencing and found that because of its emphasis on individual performance it strongly appealed to him. The coach convinced him to try out for the fencing team. He did so, earning three varsity

letters and captaining the épée squad during his last two years.

Practical knowledge of fencing colored Roger's writing long after he had given up sword-play as anything more than an occasional hobby. Whenever characters in a Zelazny story pick up bladed weapons, the reader can be assured that Roger has considered the real limitations of the weapons and their wielders. Moreover, he also adapted techniques to suit those of his characters who differ from ordinary mortals: "All of the lengthier duelling sequences in the Amber books are properly choreographed for a rapier class weapon, rather on the heavy side, as the Amberites have the extra strength to wield such a blade well."¹

Although Roger did not pursue fencing in any concentrated fashion after college, he remained interested in sword techniques. When Dalt battles the Pattern Ghost of Eric in *Prince of Chaos*, Merlin's narration of the action reveals that the swordsmen use techniques borrowed from both Japanese and European traditions. Initially, Dalt's style is the more heavily influenced by Japanese traditions; later Eric employs some Japanese

techniques himself. Since no similar details surface in the first five of the *Chronicles* (yet Eric has died fairly early in the course of events and his ghost hasn't had the opportunity to learn more) obviously the alteration is not in the Amberites, but in the author.

Unarmed combat was an even greater influence on how Roger presented combat. He studied judo for two years in college. His instructor, Bill Gavel, was a former Marines unarmed combat instructor who included practical fighting techniques "involving crushing larynxes, breaking necks and spines"² along with the sport aspects. Gavel did not offer belt tests, so Roger was not ranked at this time, but after graduating with his Master's in English from Columbia he took up judo again. He stopped after he had been ranked with a green belt.

During his military service, Roger studied karate, but again he was not ranked.

The martial art that Roger studied most seriously was aikido—a martial art that, unlike karate and judo, is usually termed a "defensive" art. Roger began studying aikido in 1982 and continued until shortly before his death. Although aikido does not use

weapons, it does bear similarities to fencing. Roger explained as follows:

*Morihei Uyeshiba, the founder of Aikido, created the art by combining Daitoryu Aikijutsu (a form of jujitsu) techniques w/the footwork for the Shinkage (Shadow-sword) school of swordmanship— i.e., in many of the techniques the attacking arm is captured in an Aikijitsu grip & then treated as if it were a sword, the cutting movement then performed resulting in the execution of the throw.*³

Roger studied aikido from white belt through black. The art influenced him in ways other than providing him with a bunch of neat physical tricks. The teacher he studied under longest was Phil Cleverley. Phil's style was a soft one that eschewed jerks, grabs, and pulls in favor of techniques that used the force of the attack against the attacker. The longer Roger studied with Phil, the more he realized that he was not only being asked to re-evaluate how he dealt with physical assault, but also how he dealt with any form of attack. Instead of rejecting the attack and the attacker, aikido embraces them. This was a new way of thinking for Zelazny, who, like many shy people, had been more

prepared to reject rather than embrace.

In order to better participate as a *uke* ("attacker") during aikido practice, Roger studied tae kwon do. He chose his teacher, Michael Robinson, because Robinson could also teach him the basic elements of hapkido. Hapkido is related to aikido by way of aikijitsu but is, in Roger's words, "much nastier." Roger only studied tae kwon do for about seven months. Shortly after his yellow belt test, he suffered a peculiar injury to the sole of his foot and so dropped out. However, learning this new art re-enforced his belief that knowledge of many forms is more effective than specialization in one. Doubtless, this is why so many of his characters are combat generalists.

When Phil Cleverley moved from Santa Fe to Albuquerque, he asked Roger to teach his course for him at least part-time. At first Roger resisted, but he found that teaching was the last element he needed to improve his own skill:

Explaining something you know only at a reflex level does require a sort of intellectualization I'd never run those things through

in the past. I discovered it to be almost identical to my earliest experiences in teaching at writing conferences and seminars.⁴

For those who want more details on this particular subject, Roger's "Introduction" to the anthology *Warriors of Blood and Dream* (which he edited), contains a thoughtful and unusually personal reflection on how the martial arts, but most especially aikido, shaped his ways of reacting to the universe.

Roger always credited a conversation with fellow writer and martial artist Walter Jon Williams with awakening a desire to find a martial art which he could practice without a partner to serve as the *uke*. Phil Cleverley suggested that he try t'ai chi and so Roger signed up with Wasantha Young to learn the Yang style, short form. T'ai chi continued to interest him, even though he ended his lessons after two years.

As noted above, what Zelazny was doing in his own life was often reflected in what he wrote. In the early story "A Rose For Ecclesiastes" Gallinger uses jujitsu to defeat his opponent Ontro, the Fist of Malann. The nameless

protagonist in the stories collected as *I Am Legion* uses judo moves in two of the three stories (knowing judo does not make the protagonist invincible, however; neither of these attacks are completely successful). In the early Amber novels, swordplay is an essential part of the way the Amberites resolve their difficulties. Indeed, one of the first things that Corwin retrieves upon his return to Amber is his sword.

As Roger's interest in the martial arts became both broader and more detailed, the techniques used by his characters also changed. This is not to say that the swashbuckling glory that typified Corwin's adventures (and those of Jack of Shadows and Dilvish the Damned) vanished. It just acquired new tools.

Corwin's son, Merlin, isn't crazy about swords at all. This isn't due to lack of training, but to personal inclination. When in *Knight of Shadows* Merlin is assaulted by a doppelganger on the Pattern, he uses an aikido technique to defeat it rather than a sword. Like another Zelazny character, Tom Gurden in *The Mask of Loki* (written with Thomas T. Thomas), Merlin prefers the

indirect method of dealing with problems. Neither of these men are pushovers but, like the art they study, they have chosen a Way that embraces the attacker and the attack rather than rejecting it. Perhaps Merlin, with a psyche that has been magically constrained by Dara and Mandor, could *not* become an expert in an aggressive "attack" art, but his Amberite's sense of self-preservation finds its outlet in aikido.

Another fascinating possibility is that as Zelazny himself learned to embrace rather than reject the attacker and the attack, he began creating characters who would also embrace rather than reject. In the first five *Chronicles*, Corwin meets with each of his siblings, but his only real ally is Random—and Random is hardly a threat to him. Merlin, although an only child, has his own group of generational peers. *Trumps of Doom* ends with Luke trapping Merlin, but by the end of the series the two young men are close friends.

Indeed, Merlin ends up with a group of allies who support him. The Ghostwheel develops a healthy relationship with his "parent"—even though it

initially resented being created as nothing more than an elaborate tool. Even Dalt (who Merlin threatened at their first meeting by digging his grave) becomes an ally of sorts. When Corwin disappears, no one seems to notice or particularly care. One cannot believe that the same indifference would govern if Merlin was to vanish.

So Zelazny's studies of the martial arts may have had more than the obvious influence on his stories. Certainly, they effected how he presented combat, but as martial arts expanded what he knew about interpersonal relationships, like any good writer, he wrote about what he knew.

¹ Letter to the author 24 February, 1989.

² "Introduction," *Warriors of Blood and Dream*. Edited by Roger Zelazny, 1995.

³ Letter to the author, 6 August 1989.

⁴ Letter to the author, 21 March 1989.